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69-year-old begins work on earning his Ph.D .

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Lee Anderson can check the following boxes: bachelor's degree, University of California; teaching certificate, Brescia University; master's degree, Western Kentucky University, 2009.

And now, at 69 years old, the recent WKU grad will go on to check another box: acceptance to the doctorate program in the history department at the University of Kentucky.

Anderson's age may make him a unique student in his classes. But perhaps what makes him even more unique is that there is one box he has never checked – high school diploma or GED.

In fact, Anderson never got past the 10th grade after dropping out of high school in California in the 1950s.

"I was incorrigible," he said. "I always got A's, but I mouthed off to teachers and administrators – I was a real snot. It was almost like a mutual agreement, everybody agreed they would be happier if I just didn't go to school anymore."

In California, passing a placement exam at the community college made a student eligible for college classes without having a diploma.

"At 29, I went back to school. The truth is, I'd gotten my second divorce and was having some trouble with depression," Anderson said. "It occurred to me I didn't know if I was crazy or not and the only way to find out was to study western civilization ... if you read the Bible, you see people suffered and doubted themselves. They weren't crazy, they were just struggling with life."

So Anderson would go on to graduate from the University of California while working in retail service centers repairing electronics and appliances. But much like today's industries, something happened to the service world that would have Anderson starting his career all over.

"In 1980, there were 250 retail service centers in Portland, Ore.," Anderson said. "By 2004, there were two. Manufacturing had changed. The first DVD player cost \$1,200 and now you can buy one for \$29.99. That shapes (the industry) because you can throw your appliance away and buy another one when it breaks."

So in 2003, Anderson moved to Owensboro, where his two daughters reside, and decided to stick his nose back into a school book. In 2004, at 65, he graduated from Brescia University with a teaching certificate, but quickly found it was not his destined career.

"I taught history in Springfield, Ky., and found out that 90 percent of the ninth-graders could not read at level," he said. "I taught for one year. It was stressful to be around kids who don't care and didn't want to be there or were there because their friends were there and they had no curiosity or self motivation."

So for the second time in his life, Anderson dropped out of high school.

Dr. Glenn LaFantasie, associate professor of history at WKU, said he was pleasantly surprised when he

saw the older gentleman enroll in master's classes at the school. LaFantasie said he only recently completed his doctorate at age 55, and found it amusing that the first student he should be a thesis adviser to would also be non-traditional.

"It's something very interesting because from time to time in higher education there have been some questions about age discrimination against older students when it comes to advanced degrees," he said. "The suspicion within the profession is because there seems to be a preference for younger people coming in, but here's a case, and I'm very proud of Western, where he was able to matriculate here for a master's and to the University of Kentucky for a doctorate, and it suggests some positive aspects in the field, and that's the way it should be."

Anderson said he always enjoyed being the oldest person in class and said because of his age, he was never afraid to make comments or ask questions. Sometimes those questions included challenging the viewpoints of history professionals, and while it wasn't always smiled upon, Anderson said his whole point in going back to school is to get all his questions answered. And he won't stop learning until he has resolved those ponderings, he said.

"Lee really added to classes in a positive way because he always has something insightful to ask or say that of course enhances any class," LaFantasie said. "He contributed not only in the fact that he asked questions or comments, but would help stimulate discussion with other students. Once he opened up in class, I found others would as well."

Anderson said he wrote his thesis on how the Civil War has been misinterpreted as a "total war." He argues with many historians use the term to describe the "bloodiest war in history," when Anderson says the term has been "drained of content" because clearly there have been more violent and catastrophic wars since then.

His philosophies, not always accepted by historians, often amuse them, he said. So with his 4.0 grade-point average and GRE score that placed him in the 97th percentile in the country, the high school dropout recently decided to "go ahead and apply" for his doctorate at UK. He became one of only 20 admitted into the program in the fall.

"I felt like someone kicked me in the stomach," Anderson said when he learned of his acceptance. "I'd never heard of anyone being 69 years old in a Ph.D. program. I'll be at least 40 years older than everyone else. But I'm really competitive. I like being 69 and still scoring in the 97 percentile on the GRE. I like to take it as a challenge, a fun challenge."

More than 50 years after walking out of the classroom, Anderson said he can hardly stay out of one. His tiny apartment is lined, floor to ceiling, with bookshelves full of Civil War facts, and Anderson said he hasn't owned a TV in years because he has too much reading to do.

The "poster child for life-long learning" said he would like to eventually teach at a small university and help make a difference in a few people's lives who may feel as lost as he did at 29.

But Anderson said he has no plans of dropping out of school again anytime soon.

"Maybe by that time, I'll die and won't have any more questions and maybe I'll have contributed a little along the way," he said of completing his doctorate.